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# The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those  
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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## PLOT AND CLIMAX ESSENTIALS.

**I**N A PLOT SENSE, it may be said that the whole of a short story is the climax. The most concise and practical definition of plot that I have found is: A problem and its solution. If a tale can not be reduced to this formula, it is a simple narrative, rather than a short story. The phrase not only constitutes a definition, but a recipe for the planning of fiction. One student writer whose publishable work appears regularly, put the matter thus in a recent letter: "To write stories that sell isn't much of a trick. It appears to be a matter of stating a problem, then solving it in a way that is logical but not perfectly obvious."

From a purely mechanical viewpoint, this is, indeed, the whole of plot building. However, it is not altogether a simple matter to make the solution logical without making it too obvious. Problems are easy to devise,—they confront us at every turn,—but it is not so easy to solve them effectively.

Suppose, for instance, that you allow your boy hero to have his foot captured in a rock crevice which holds him prisoner inside a cave, while the tide slowly rises over his head. There you have a problem: How is the boy's life to be saved? But the answer presents a good many difficulties. You might allow him to work his foot loose—but that would be obvious. You might let the tide fail to reach its usual height—but that would not be logical. C. H. Claudy, one of the regular writers for *The American Boy*, solved this problem recently by causing the hero to put the bulb of his camera in his mouth, while he held the open end of the rubber tube above the surface of the water. By means of this improvised diving apparatus, he was able to sustain life until rescue came. "Six Inches of Water," was a rattling good boy's story, because the solution of the problem was logical, yet not obvious. The average reader, that is, would not have anticipated it in advance.

The relative importance of the two elements of plot would be better indicated, if we phrased our definition: Plot is the solution of a problem. For the solution is the all-important thing. When an editor returns your story with the comment: "A well-written

tale, but it lacks a novel twist," he means that you have solved the problem in a familiar way. The reader knows the answer before it is given. The best possible plot material is a new device for solving a problem. Have your climax—the solution—to start with, then devise a problem to fit it.

It is probable that in writing "Six Inches of Water," Mr. Claudy followed this plan of working back from the climax to the problem. Perhaps he had idly noted the distant similarity between a camera tube and a diving apparatus. This would lead to the invention of an emergency in which the tube could be used for just such a purpose. The introductory part would be reached the last thing before actual development began—the boy's possession of the camera must be accounted for by giving him an interest in photography, and his pursuit of that art must bring him into the position of danger from which his presence of mind finally rescues him.

Yet, though the plot must have been worked out backward from solution to problem, it comes to the reader problem first. The result is a logically worked out story, with an unexpected twist at the climax.

As a means of stimulating a writer's invention, the advice is sometimes given: "Let your characters fall into difficulties, then set your wits to extricate them." This method sometimes works very well; but more often the result is commonplace. Many somehow ineffective stories that have come to my desk were obviously developed by this method. The author has put the characters into a situation which at once captures the reader's interest; but the climax, or solution, is a bare working out of details which reveal only moderate powers of invention. It is usually forced, obvious, and mediocre.

In testing a plot idea, consider chiefly the possibilities for a striking climax. Almost every germinal idea may be used either for the opening situation—the problem—or for the solution. By all means, however, let it serve as your climax. Let me illustrate:

Suppose we conceive the idea of a vengeful flock of hawks, which bring about the death of many aviators by attacking them in the air and causing them to lose control of their machines.

The idea contains possibilities either for a problem or for the solution of a problem. For convenience, suppose we lay the scene in the future, when a night patrol of the heavens has become a natural extension of police service. Let us consider, first, the plan of using the idea as the basis of our *problem*.

The birds would be the recognized enemies of the sky-police. They would make nightly attacks on the air patrolmen, clawing and pecking at their eyes, and flapping with their wings until the aviators became frantic and lost control of their machines. Many

fatalities result. The problem of how to rid the air of this scourge will be a serious one. This, it must be granted, makes a situation that could be so developed as to grip the reader.

But, to my mind, when we reach the point of the climax, no very effective solution of the problem presents itself. Various methods could be devised for exterminating the birds; but this is not at all a surprising development. A short story so worked out will be almost certain to prove somewhat disappointing. We shall have wasted all our powder in the preliminary attack upon the reader's interest. There is nothing left that is quite effective enough, in comparison with the opening situation, to grip him. The statement of the problem contains our supreme effort of invention.

Now that we have tried this mode of construction and found it wanting, suppose we transpose the factors. Let the birds and their part in the affair remain out of sight until the climax. The problem will be to ascertain what it is that causes the seemingly inexplicable deaths of the sky-patrolmen.

I feel certain that this was the logical construction for "A Nemesis of the Air," because it enabled me to prepare the reader's mind carefully for the strongest revelation of my story—the nature of the mysterious cause which sent the aviators hurtling to their death. Incidentally, a magazine editor thought so too. The only solution that suggests itself in the early development is the supernatural one contained in the curse of an old inventor who was disappointed at not receiving the contract for municipal aeroplanes. The inventor had died, insisting that his vengeance would pursue the sky-police and bring them one by one to their deaths. The concluding revelation is that, on dying, he released a flock of hawks which had been trained to attack furiously any person wearing the uniform of the sky-police. Thus, the old man is responsible for the scourge, though not exactly in the supernatural way that his words would have indicated.

Another method possible in the development of this story would have been that of taking the old man's viewpoint, setting him the problem of "getting even" for his fancied wrongs, and solving this problem by the introduction of trained birds. This, however, would have made it difficult to secure surprise. The solution could not have been confined to the concluding paragraphs, where it would leave the strongest impression on the reader.

Similar inversion can be applied to almost any plot. The germ of the story is probably the feature which makes it worth the telling, and the question of where to concentrate its effectiveness is one of great importance. The germinal idea of Mr. Claudy's "Six Inches of Water," was that of the improvised diving apparatus. Therefore, it was best introduced at the climax.

Perhaps you have received a manuscript back with the editorial comment: "A good idea, but you have failed to make the most of it." Examine the story and see whether the criticism was not due to the fact that you employed your basic idea for the problem, rather than for the solution. Try an inversion of the plot elements to bring your strong point out at the conclusion. In a great many cases, this is just what is needed to make the most of the story's possibilities. The "big idea," whatever it may be, is the feature that belongs in the solution of your problem. If you have devised a novel method of escape from a burglar-proof bank vault, by all means let that be the culmination of your action. If you have thought of a unique relation of characters toward each other, the chances are very much in favor of a story which makes this relation the climax, rather than the opening situation.

The student can not undertake a more efficient exercise for developing his plot sense than that of studying, from this viewpoint, published stories in all sorts of magazines. Dissect the narrative until you have the problem and the solution clearly in mind, then try to follow the train of reasoning which caused the editor to develop his story as he did, rather than otherwise. Note how, in most cases, the crux of the story is contained in the climax, and also how this climax idea might have been employed as the problem, rather than its solution, had not the author possessed the judgment to discern that, so employed, it would have failed to leave a strong final impression.

*(Lack of space prevents the publication of this discussion in full. The article will be concluded in the March Student-Writer.)*

### NAMING THE CHARACTERS.

"**H**OW do you think of names for all your characters?" is a question successful authors are often asked. One writer answered this without hesitation: "Frankly, I don't know. When I conceive a character to fit a certain part, an appropriate name seems to pop into mind with his mental image. It is just as much a part of him as his whiskers and manner of speech."

This, undoubtedly, is characteristic of the mental processes of many experienced writers. However, it is probably a developed faculty. It comes from trying, in earlier efforts, to fit the name to the character.

Often it is difficult to decide whether a name should be commonplace or unusual. The familiar names, Smith, or Johnson, or Williams, in certain cases, may suggest lack of originality on the part of the writer. But in another instance, John Jones may be

just the right name, denoting a man who is very representative, or again, a man who is so unique that he rises above his name.

A striking or unusual character should generally be suggested by a rather unusual name. It is often well to give your villain a harsh, repellent name, such as "Squeers," or "Fagin," or "Sikes." Strength is denoted by certain rugged names, as "Grant," "Wainwright," etc. However it is true that not all names suggest the same traits to different people. And no rule can be given—except to search until you find the name that seems to you, as writer, to fit the character. The chief thing for which many writers may be criticised in such connection is that they give too little attention to this feature.

Incidentally, be careful not to give your villain a name that is too frequently met with in real life. A story recently came back from a prominent editor with the advice that it might be well to change the name of an unsavory family described therein, as there were at least five hundred sensitive readers of that name in the United States. This suggestion is worth heeding, though it would, perhaps be an unwarranted deduction to suppose that a story would leap into instant popularity because the heroine happened to be Miss Smith, and the hero John Jones.

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### PHOTOPLAYS OR FICTION--WHICH?

**C**ONDITIONS in the literary field at the present time are more favorable for the beginning writer than they have been not so very long past, and peculiarly enough, this is a result of the photoplay vogue. The beginner, in former days, had no prospective field other than the magazines; hence, competition for the bottom rungs was very keen. Now, however, most novices turn their attention to photoplay writing, because they reason that a good story, even though told without literary charm, will get by as a photoplay outline.

This reasoning is logical. However, it is unfair to encourage writers to expect that they can easily break into the photoplay markets. The field is a difficult one, and it is becoming more and more limited to professionals on the staffs of the various producing companies. The writer of some literary ability will do best, in most cases, if he concentrates upon trying to please the magazines, rather than the scenario directors.

The best chance in the photoplay field seems to exist for unusual comedy ideas. A greater number of serious dramas are produced, it is true; but it is also true that they are easier to write. Many a staff man can sit down and work out a more or less mediocre

mystery story or "heart throb" tale in a few hours; but a new humorous idea will not so readily come at the writer's call.

Competition in the photoplay field is increasing, rather than diminishing, while the opposite is the case, if anything, with story writing.

## I WANT YOUR OPINIONS.

**A**S FAR AS the scope of The Student-Writer will permit, I want your ideas for making it a useful tool of the trade. This means every writer into whose hands a copy falls. Are there particular subjects you would like to have treated, or special bits of information you would appreciate? If so, let me know, and the suggestions will be gratefully borne in mind in the preparation of future issues. If some of the articles published in the first two numbers—and those to follow—happen to fit your needs, I should be glad to learn that also.

(Note.—I do not exploit the names of students; but these extracts from letters which have been written to me in response to letters of criticism, are representative of many in my possession.)

I am in receipt of your note of the 20th inst., and appreciate your congratulations almost as much as remarks (and marks), which helped me put over the story. I would like to pass my hand gently over your dome to satisfy my curiosity as to just what sort of habitat is necessary to shelter a brain possessed of the uncanny ability unerringly to separate the fictional wheat and tares. Am enclosing with this another thriller \* \* \*

It was awfully good of you to give me so complete an amplification of that \* \* \* criticism. I assure you that I appreciate it. Some of these days, if I ever catch up with books I am writing, and a flock of special article work, I'm going to try my hand at some \* \* \* stories, and I believe I'll engage you as literary consultant, for I am greatly pleased with the way you dissect the meat out of a composition.

You are very helpful and inspiring in your criticisms, especially in this last. I have had a little experience with critics other than you, and they seemed invariably to think I wanted to be flattered. When my work won't sell to first-class magazines, I know there is something wrong with it. But I feel you are sincere and interested and I appreciate it. \* \* \*

Received your letter with much pleasure. I wish to express to you my thanks for your interest in me and some day, I hope, I shall justify your faith in my arrival. \* \* \*

Your suggestions for the strengthening of the plot submitted last week were fine. I'm going right to work on that story. \* \* \*

A recommendation of my ability and sincere desire to help the student is contained in such letters as the above. However, you can judge better whether I am able to help YOU, by sending a manuscript for criticism. I am glad to answer all reasonable questions in connection with the service.

## An Outline of the Varied Service I Offer to Writers

Writers must have in themselves the latent ability to produce literature; but often progress can be materially aided by competent instruction. The method I have developed from preparing several thousand letters of advice for student writers is, first to consider a manuscript from the viewpoint of a general reader; second, from the viewpoint of an editor; and third, from the viewpoint I would take if I were the writer. Regarding it as if it were my own, I ask: "What is necessary to make this piece of work stronger? What changes in the plot, the characters, the style, the dialogue, and other features, are needed, before it will be in the best possible shape for submission?" The result of this threefold consideration goes to the student in the form of a constructive criticism, with list of possible markets, if the material contains salable possibilities. The rates for prose manuscripts are:

500 words or less.....	\$ .50
500 to 1,000 words.....	1.00
1,000 to 2,000 words.....	1.50
2,000 to 5,000 words.....	2.00
5,000 to 7,500 words.....	2.50
7,500 to 10,000 words.....	3.00
10,000 to 15,000 words.....	4.00
15,000 to 20,000 words.....	5.00
Each 10,000 words above 20,000.....	2.50

(Thus 35,000 words would be \$8.75; 70,000 words, \$17.50, etc.)

Verse: 4 cents a line; minimum, 50 cents.

Photoplays and plays included under rates for prose.

In ordinary cases a week will suffice for a criticism. Where special haste is required, manuscripts will be returned within twenty-four hours of their receipt.

For second reading of manuscript, after revision, but half the regular fee is charged. (Thus, 2,000 words, \$1.00, etc.)

**COUPON BOOKS.**—Reduced rates may be obtained by paying for several criticisms at one time. Coupon books entitling to ten criticisms of stories 5,000 words or less in length, regular rate \$20.00, will be issued at \$14.00 when paid for in advance. Five coupons, value \$10.00, can be purchased for \$7.50 in advance; three, value \$6.00, for \$5.00 in advance; and two criticisms paid for at the same time will be charged at \$3.50 instead of \$4.00.

## YEAR'S SUPERVISION STORY WRITING COURSE.

Experience has convinced me that I can offer students the most satisfactory assistance by taking entire supervision over their literary work for a period of a year or more. I have no set form lessons. Each student presents a different problem, and I prefer to make a study of his or her individual needs. I have found the plan successful both with beginners and with those who have already attained a degree of success. The result with the former is to bring their work up to acceptable standards. With the latter the result is increased confidence, a more regular output, and the attainment of better markets.

The work assigned is thoroughly practical. Technique is mastered only by conceiving, planning, and writing original stories—not one story, but dozens. In accepting students, I prefer to know as much as possible about their ambitions, experience, opportunities for work, philosophy of life—a photograph is often helpful in enabling me to attain the close personal relationship desirable with the student.

While the class is described as covering a year's instruction; the supervision in most cases will extend over a longer period. Each student, no matter how slowly lessons are completed, will receive the same amount of help, though it may be extended over considerably more than a year's time.

Clients are expected to send me all their literary output, together with such questions as may occur. Plot outlines are submitted for



criticism, and the more promising are developed, revised, and again revised, if necessary, until they represent the writer's best capabilities.

The fee for this course is \$100. A discount of 10 per cent is made for payment in advance. If the student prefers, however, payments may be made at \$10.00 down and \$10.00 per month, or \$25.00 down and \$25.00 quarterly thereafter, until the full \$100 is paid.

**BRIEF STORY WRITING COURSE.**—A series of individual criticisms constitutes a short course in story writing. The student may secure a pronounced discount by paying for ten criticisms in advance, as above explained.

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## SERVICES OF JOHN H. CLIFFORD.

**IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT.**—The department of typing and manuscript preparation in the Student-Writer workshop is under the personal supervision of Mr. John H. Clifford, formerly of prominent New York publishing houses. A brief summary of his experience follows:

On editorial staff American Book Co., schoolbook publishers, 4 years.

On editorial staff National Alumni, publishers of The Great Events, 20 volumes.

On Editorial staff University Society, publishers of standard literature, young folks' books, etc.; managing editor of Booklovers Shakespeare, 40 vols.; Dickens's works, with notes and critical comments, 30 vols.; Life and Works of Abraham Lincoln, 8 vols.; Standard History of the World, 10 vols.; Modern Eloquence, 10 vols.; Encyclopedia of Music, and other standard works.

On editorial staff Encyclopedia Americana; wrote many articles for that work.

The opportunity for writers and publishers to obtain such authoritative and experienced help as Mr. Clifford offers in his particular line is unusual. While all of the manuscript preparation in the "workshop" will be under his eye, the charges for particular editorial service by either Mr. Clifford or Mr. Hawkins will be as follows:

Correcting of proof sheets for authors or publishers, per thousand words . . . . .	.50
Recasting of poems with typing, per line 5c, minimum . . . . .	.50
Literary revision, (prose, including all changes needed to bring a writer's style up to a concise, readable standard; cutting down of manuscripts when advisable, etc.), typing not included, per thousand words . . . . .	.75
Literary revision with typing, per thousand words . . . . .	1.00
Editing with typing, per thousand words . . . . .	.50
Structural revision, editing of very difficult copy, compiling and similar service subject to estimate.	

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**TYPING SERVICE.**—Experienced typists who have been trained to prepare letter-perfect manuscripts for submission to the editors, are employed in the "workshop." Rates:

**Type Copying** (with ordinary corrections in punctuation, spelling, etc.) with carbon copy, per thousand words, 50 cents.

**Difficult copy** subject to estimate.

**Poems**, 1 cent a line, minimum, 25 cents.

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**Willard E. Hawkins,**

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